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THE INCONSISTENCY OF JOHN DRYDEN

Dryden has so long stood as the first and one of the greatest of those men who made of the eighteenth century an age of reason, of sound sense, of firm and lasting prose, that new approaches to the study of either his verse or his criticism seem hardly possible. The fine massiveness of the man towering above the little wits of the age has had a peculiar appeal to critics from that day to this. His splendid outbursts of criticism, his large and genial praise of favorite authors, and the inevitable comparison of his critical remarks with those of the only other critic of importance during the period of his literary activity, Thomas Rymer, have tended to obscure some of the weaknesses of his position. Dr. Johnson, himself a commanding figure in eighteenth-century criticism, peculiarly fitted to pass upon his predecessor, has justly said that Dryden's criticism is the criticism of a poet; "not a dull collection of theorems, nor a rude detection of faults, which the censor was not able to have committed; but a gay and vigorous dissertation, where delight is mingled with instruction." More recently, Mr. Saintsbury, with his customary abandonment of judgment where his subject pleases him, chooses to sacrifice Boileau to Dryden, claiming for him a place on that shelf—no spacious one—reserved for the best criticism of the world. He introduced, our critic continues, "the English fashion of criticising, as Shakespeare did the English fashion of dramatizing—the fashion of aiming at delight, at truth, at justice, at nature, at poetry, and letting the rules take care of themselves."

But to most thoughtful students of the time, it was Dryden's very inability ever to forget the rules that makes this extravagant praise so unsatisfactory. Other admirers attempt in various ways to explain his alternate subserviency to the rules and his delightful abandonment of himself to his own mood, the uncomfortable discrepancy between what he really felt and what he thought he ought to feel. Thus, one of the latest of these, Dr. W. E. Bohn,¹ divides his critical activity into five periods, and pro-

¹ *Publications of the Mod. Lang. Association*, new series, vol. 22, 1907.

ceeds to show a real growth through them all. That is to say, it is possible to prove that Dryden was consistently inconsistent, and that his very inconsistency gave evidence of a steady growth of his critical powers toward a sound and consistent maturity.

A glance at the conditions under which literature was produced during this period will help to make clear how difficult it was for one to maintain a single attitude towards anything. The first years following the Restoration marked the reign of irresponsible pleasure: the king thought only of a life of gayety; his subjects, tired of the severe Puritan discipline and charmed by the graces of their sovereign, let themselves slip gently with the current. Had Charles conducted his own life with some show of discretion; had he not played politics with the court of Louis; above all, had he and his successor left Englishmen in possession of the assurance that their dearly bought religious liberties should remain intact, there would doubtless have been no Revolution and no Orange Succession. His foolish conduct in submitting to the domination of the French king and his confessed partiality for the Catholic faith were indeed the direct causes of the political strife which was to terminate in the expulsion of the Stuarts from the throne of England. So long as the king did not interfere with the established privileges of his subjects, he might be as wayward in his private life as he pleased, but when the great principles for which so much blood had been shed were in danger, the ancient spirit of the Puritans was called again into being with a force and a bitterness astonishing to the careless monarch. Party passion ran high; and the newly-formed parties, the Whigs and the Tories, found their alignment upon the succession of James, the Catholic brother of the king.

To oppose the Whigs, Charles relied upon a number of hired pamphleteers, whose duty it was to break down and destroy by whatever means the reputation of those who might champion the popular cause. The king dispensed his patronage to these paid servants, though his fickle nature and conveniently short memory made the existence of any writer dependent on the royal favor most precarious. Like king, like courtier; and his followers called into their service whoever hoped to gain a living by his pen, and proved themselves as uncertain in their payment

as their master. The profession of letters in the days of the Merry Monarch was likely to be neither a very profitable nor a very honorable employment.

Conditions were indeed as unfavorable as possible for the development of an original literature of any kind. Outside of the court, the English reading public did not exist. Public taste had not been formed; libraries, with the exception of certain meagre collections of the Classics, were practically unheard of; and any pretension to learning or taste was affected or derived from foreign sources. The only literary form that can be said to have really flourished was the drama, and this had become so wholly subservient to the whims of a corrupt court circle that anything like leadership in this direction was out of the question. The Restoration theatre revealed a combination of the ancient English heroic spectacle with an appeal to the grossest passions of the audience. This audience, quite without reverence, and without the semblance of moral standards whatsoever, sought only to kill an hour's *ennui*; and attained no higher level of taste than was possessed by its patrons. Few plays appeared during this time which did not, either directly or by implication, offend against decency. The heroic play, with its bombast and its false presentation of moral values, just as slavishly pandered to a vicious popular taste as the more brutal comedy. These two forms of Restoration drama were indeed merely the clumsy attempts of unskilful workmen to impose upon the playwrights of the English stage a set of dramatic rules formulated by another country naturally and in harmony with its own national genius. The result in England was not happy. The English temper, naturally expansive and restive under restraint, did not take kindly to rules supposedly unalterable and inevitable. Moreover, new ones must be manufactured to cover the gradual admixture with the drama of Corneille and Racine of certain dramatic forms which had survived from the last days before the closing of the theatres by the Puritans; and an age of license as respects other matters found it difficult to subject itself to the discipline of laws it did not comprehend. This awkward compromise produced complete literary anarchy. Up to the time of Dryden's death in 1700, there was scarcely a

literary canon which had been accepted by more than a small portion of those who wrote for the stage. In literature, as well as in politics and religion, the age of Dryden was an age of transition, a transition from the spacious Elizabethan freedom to the absolutism of the eighteenth century.

Now, among conditions such as these, let us set a man of large, general powers with no very strong will to guide them; give him splendid reasoning abilities without any profound convictions; let him be dependent on a fickle public and more fickle patrons; and we see Dryden's situation at the beginning of his career. With a mind singularly open to conviction and a capacity for controversy quite equal to that of any of his contemporaries, he came perilously near to the attitude of mind of the accomplished sophist. In a time of great political and literary strife he proved himself a powerful antagonist, evidently delighting in the rough-and-tumble battle of wits which made up much of the writing of the day.

To what extent he was willing to lend his pen to the cause of his masters can be seen by examining the titles of some of his early poems. It cannot be said that the career of Charles's future laureate opened auspiciously. His cousin, Pickering, had been chamberlain under Cromwell, and in September, 1658, the young poet published *Heroic Stanzas on the Late Lord Protector*. It did not take long, however, to efface whatever unfavorable impression these youthful verses may have produced, for in 1661 two poems appeared, *A Panegyric on the Coronation* and *Astræa Redux, a poem on the happy restoration and return of his sacred Majesty, King Charles the Second*. Thenceforth Dryden was to be no mean sponsor for his royal patrons. Dr. Johnson's comment on his unashamed praise of the great defines pretty well one of the essential weaknesses of his character. "When once he has undertaken," he declares, "the task of praise, he no longer retains shame in himself, nor supposes it in his patron. . . . He had all forms of excellence, intellectual and moral, combined in his mind, with endless variation, and when he had scattered on the hero of the day the golden shower of wit and virtue, he had ready for him, whom he wished to court on the morrow, new wit and virtue with another stamp. . . .

There are minds which easily sink into submission, that look on grandeur with undistinguishing reverence, and discover no defect where there is elevation of rank and affluence of riches." It is true, however, that Dryden was neither above nor below the universal practice of his day. The real fact is that he lived amongst the great, in a society of artificial manners and false sentiment; and he found nothing to detract from his self-respect in submitting to the common practice of literary men of the time. If we keep this view of him before us, we ought not to find it difficult to discover a real consistency in the apparently inconsistent acts of his life. A man of large mould, with no strong prejudices in favor of any point of view, he saw no denial of his intellectual honesty either in abject flattery of his patrons or in allowing other men to provide the starting-points for his thinking. Indeed, his mental life never advanced beyond a restless search for some external authority upon which he might place the burden of his opinions.

Before turning to an examination of Dryden's criticism, let us see how this point of view is borne out with respect to his politics and his religion. By 1670 he had become so important a literary figure that the king appointed him Historiographer and Poet Laureate to fill the place recently made vacant by the death of Sir William Davenant. From that time until Charles's death, Dryden's pen was at the service of the king and the great nobles of his court. The memorable series of satires published during the years 1681-1683 and occasioned by the trial of the Earl of Shaftesbury as a result of the collapse of Monmouth's rebellion, the two parts of *Absalom and Achitophel*, *The Medal*, and *MacFlecknoe*, gave him an opportunity to strike lusty blows at his personal enemies as well as at those of the king. Here he found a congenial field for his strong descriptive powers, and those parts of *Absalom and Achitophel* which are his, and *MacFlecknoe*, remain the best specimens of personal satire of which the language can boast. Infinitely superior is their free, powerful, generous anger to the petty stabs of Pope's malice. Dryden loved a stand-up, knock-down fight, as his life spent in controversy proves, but his generous nature scorned petty or underhand revenge.

Quite in keeping with the poet's habitual flattery of the royal master, *Albion and Albanus*, an opera composed in commemoration of Charles's successes, appeared in 1685; and Dryden had its sequel, *King Arthur*, ready for performance when the king died. During the stormy years of James's reign, he produced little; and after the revolution of 1688, when he lost his pensions, he busied himself with translations and other matter more congenial to his temper. As a result, the last ten years of his life show on the whole the best and most delightful work the poet ever did. As soon as the pressure of the court was removed, he reverted to self-imposed tasks which must have brought real compensation for the loss of his perquisites.

That he felt the pinch of poverty in his declining years is made clear by more than one expression in his published work. As early as 1676, in the Dedication to *Aureng-Zebe*, we hear him admitting that he lived wholly on the king's bounty and that if it were withdrawn it would spell ruin. Again, more than fifteen years later, in the *Discourse on Satire*, 1693, he complained that though the king had encouraged his design for an epic poem, it was nothing but fair words. It must have been a genuine relief to him to know that he need no longer depend on the word of princes.

Dryden's change of religion has given rise to much comment unfavorable to his reputation for sincerity. To my mind, he was quite sincere in his act, at least as sincere as a man could be on whom the question of salvation never weighed heavily, and who, like a tired child, wished to shift the responsibility of opinion upon shoulders older and more capable of bearing it than his. I doubt if Dryden experienced any great revulsion of feeling or underwent a profound intellectual change when he embraced the Catholic faith. He was neither a constructive philosopher nor did he possess the true artist's vision, which holds before one a single goal which he must reach in scorn of consequence. He was rather an eminent man of letters, living in an age of skepticism, who groped for some universally accepted authority which might become for him an infallible guide in matters of faith. In the *Religio Laici*, published in 1682, he had frankly admitted as much as taking up the cudgels in behalf

of the Anglican Church against the Catholics and the Dissenters. During the following five years, before the appearance of the *Hind and the Panther*, he had no doubt come under the direction of the one true Church, whose priests must have pointed out how comforting to a restless soul are her sacred teachings. After the Revolution he remained constant to his new faith in spite of temptations to take the Protestant oath and retain his pension. These last years of his life are really admirable in the dignity and silence with which he bore his reversal of fortune.

If, then, in his public and private life he revealed a decided tendency to unsteadiness of purpose and uncertainty of conviction, have we not the right to suppose that he carried this mental habit into his literary and critical work? Let us see how consistently he retained this inconsistency of purpose.

Dryden's intention in writing for the stage was, by his own admission, to gain a living. In his *Defense of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, 1668, he frankly declares: "I confess my chief endeavors are to delight the age in which I live. If the humor of this be for low comedy, small accidents, and raillery, I will force my genius to obey it, though with more expedition I could write in verse." This pathetic avowal indicates the reason why he condescended to contribute to a literary form for which he was by nature unfitted. It was a lamentable yielding to the worst tendencies of the time, for which he was to make a manly apology in his old age under the sting of Jeremy Collier's sharp rebuke.

Of the forms of the drama which he attempted—the so-called heroic play, tragedy, and the comedy of manners—only in tragedy did he achieve anything like artistic success. Even *All for Love*, his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, proves, in spite of much splendid verse, that Dryden's genius was not dramatic. In trying to concentrate the ten years' action of the original play into one day he has merely succeeded in excluding the dramatic interest from it altogether. The tragic crisis is already past, the two immortal lovers are already defeated and await their doom as best they may. The fact is, Dryden, in trying to obey certain external unities, the purpose of which he never understood, failed of Shakespeare's

unity of conception, failed indeed to show any control over tragic action whatever. The beauties of *All for Love* are lyric, as the title and sub-title would indicate. *The World Well Lost* precludes any struggle of the individual will against fate; it demands fine poetry, passionate declamation rather lyric than dramatic in character, and a centering of attention more on moods than on action. For what, then, did he admire Shakespeare? Briefly, for his diversity, for his comprehensive soul, for his supreme poetry. Dryden never could have become a great dramatic critic, for in practice he proved his utter inability to understand the dramatic form.

With respect to the other two dramatic forms, the heroic play and comedy, he was at once the most prolific and the least original figure of the period. The first of these may be defined as a crude endeavor to adapt the Fletcherian tragedy to the new requirements for play-writing which had been imported from across the Channel. In the hands of unconscientious English dramatists the solemn tragedy of Corneille became the medium for the utterance of false heroics and hollow sentiment. The exaggerated struggle between love and honor merely concealed sensuality under a thin veil of romance. That Dryden could out-Herod Herod does credit solely to his superiority of versification. Certainly he showed no leadership either in creation of new types or in mastery of old ones. How far he was willing to descend in order to satisfy the desires of his corrupt audience may be seen from a brief quotation, quite typical of the kind of rant these disillusioned, roué children of the court of Charles relished :—

Is not love love without a priest and altars?
The temples are inanimate, and know not
What vows are made in them; the priest stands ready
For his hire, and cares not what hearts he couples;
Love alone is marriage.

In such a drama there are actions but no action; activity of some kind must be constantly under way to satisfy a jaded audience; and consequently spectacular effects and tremendous thrills took the place of dramatic excellence.

As for comedy, Dryden simply did not have any talent for it.

Following the lead of Etheredge and Wycherley, he imitated Molière, debasing the high comedy and infinite good taste of the Frenchman to suit his public. He had contracted with the Company of the King's Theatre to produce three plays a year, and between 1668 and 1681 he actually did write fourteen plays, for the most part without much merit. Among other offences against good taste, he had the effrontery to turn *Paradise Lost* into an opera, calling it *The Age of Innocence*, perhaps unconsciously damning his own time by his treatment of the theme. No doubt Milton, in giving consent to having his lines 'tagged,' made such reflections as were proper upon the spirit of the age. *The Mock Astrologer*, moreover, was condemned in 1668 by both Pepys and Evelyn as a symptom of the degeneracy of the age. That Dryden did not willingly lend his pen to this kind of writing will readily be granted. As late as 1690 he thus speaks of his return to the drama: "But enough of this; the difficulties increase, and I am still condemned to dig in those exhausted mines."² Fortunately for literature, he was not compelled to work long at such drudgery,

The various prefaces and dedications which form the body of Dryden's prose became, by virtue of their character as occasional pieces in support of whatever their author might be doing at the moment, the pleading of a workman seeking to defend himself from adverse criticism. Like the great dramatist Corneille, with whom he is oftenest compared, he was restive under the yoke laid on him by the new standards of writing which were beginning to obtain a foothold in the world of letters; but, unlike his French contemporary, he never found it convenient to submit. His vigorous and expansive, but non-conformist British mind, prevented him from doing much to assist men like Hobbes and Howard and Shadwell in working out a dramatic technique. Instead, he wavered, now quarrelling with the defender of one point of view, later yielding to the very position he had formerly attacked. He held himself too evenly poised between two moods: pushed one way by his English temperament, he was pulled in the opposite direction by his French rules. His

² Dedication to *Don Sebastian*.

literary moods, instead of being self-regulated and under the guidance of laws naturally formed through experiment, felt themselves constrained by that foreign yoke which never rested easily on his shoulders and to which he paid unwilling obedience. Though sincerely admiring his great predecessors in the drama, he considered it necessary to apologize for them to a public which in his heart he must have scorned. In the Preface to *Aureng-Zebe* he complained bitterly :—

Let him retire, between two ages cast,
The first of this, the hindmost of the last.

The poet here confesses his own inadaptability to his time and his failure to follow the natural bent of his genius. This confusion between his inclination and his submission to external authority, which we saw governed much of his religious life, as well as the characteristic opportunism that had so much to do in forming his opinions, is easily traceable in nearly all his critical observations. For example, his defence of rhyme as a fit medium for dramatic poetry shows how his mind failed to grasp any fundamental critical problem. When at first he attempted to follow the prevailing fashion of the heroic play, he also adopted rhyme in his verse, not perceiving that this represented a complete break with the English tradition formed through forty years of dramatic activity. When, in 1688, he made his defence of rhyme in the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, he was sharply answered by Sir Robert Howard, who in the Preface to *The Duke of Lerma* attacked some of the literary fashions of the day. The following year Dryden replied by his *Defense of the Essay* in which he yielded some ground in his contention. "Rhyme," he observes, "has something of the usurper in him; but he is brave and generous and his dominion pleasing." By 1678, the date of the publication of *All for Love*, rhyme had been displaced by blank verse in the heroic play, and Dryden, with customary facility, conformed to the accepted mode. "Not that I condemn my former way," he declares, "but that this is more proper to my present purpose."

A better illustration of his mental habits, however, can be obtained by an examination of his observations upon the critical

ideas of his time and his criticism of Shakespeare and Fletcher and Ben Jonson. Throughout the *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, that splendid dialogue wherein he set the two lobes of his brain to arguing, he maintains a fairly judicial attitude towards the relative merits of the classic plays, the French drama, and the English drama of the age preceding, though it is plain enough that his heart turns to his favorite "Giant Race before the Flood." Indeed the praise which he bestows on Shakespeare could hardly be surpassed. "It is a perpetual model of encomiastic criticism," declared Dr. Johnson; "exact without minuteness, and lofty without exaggeration." Dryden is in the full tide of his powers; he has the courage to give free reign to his mental preferences; and his mind turns at once to the great men who have been the inspiration of his young manhood. Not till the very end of his life does he offer another such genuine outpouring of his soul.

By 1672 he had gained his public; and, flushed with success, he could condescend a bit to those of another and a ruder age. In the *Defense of the Epilogue* he accordingly proceeds to patronize the Elizabethans, giving them but grudging praise, and accusing them of lowness, of false wit, of incorrectness. What deserves notice, however, is not so much that his observations are not true, as that he gives such emphasis to them to the detriment of finer things he is able to say. Of Shakespeare he can say: "Many of his words, and more of his phrases, are scarce intelligible. And of those which we understand, some are ungrammatical, others worse; and his whole style is so permeated with figurative expressions, that it is as affected as it is obscure." And throughout the essay his tone is captious and faultfinding. Of course Dryden is here submitting to the dictates of the new standards of taste which were gradually clearing away the excesses of the later Jacobean drama. The shadow of the rules was beginning to fall upon him, and he felt the tyranny of the search for correctness. "Well-placing of words for the sweetness of pronunciation was not known till Mr. Waller introduced it," he declares in all seriousness, quite in the vein of Pope fifty years later. And this increased correctness of expression in the present age was due to the

existence of better manners, a more refined society, and a more affable monarch. At this point the author of the *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* has arrived in four years.

The years from 1675 to 1679 mark a period of decline in court favor when Dryden was able to turn to his own pursuits without fear of pecuniary loss. The Preface to *Aureng-Zebe*, 1675, shows a return of his old love for Shakespeare,—a generous admiration for the poet, unmarred by carping enumeration of petty faults. In 1677 appeared his fine *Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic License*, one of his best prose efforts. It is almost Longinian in scope, containing splendid bursts of eloquence in praise of *Paradise Lost* and in denunciation of the merely correct writer. Two short years later he published his *Grounds for Criticism in Tragedy* as a preface for the adaptation which he made of *Troilus and Cressida* for the contemporary stage. This is a veritable text-book of dramatic technique, quite in the neo-classic vein, for by this time Dryden was in subjection to neo-classical tyranny, never again to free himself until the last year of his life. The last twenty years reveal him, though less dependent on the court, much more under the necessity of submitting to the popular will. They also disclose that fruitless search for authority which was largely the tragedy of his personal life.

No doubt the publication of certain treatises by eminent Frenchmen within a few years had great weight in imposing their dogmas upon him. Boileau had published in 1674 his translation and commentary upon Longinus, and in 1677 Dryden produced his *Apology for Heroic Poetry*, which may well have received an impulse from the French work. Rapin's *Réflexions sur la Poétique* appeared in 1674 and Bossu's *Traité du Poème Epique* in 1675, both of which works, utterly pseudo-classical as they were, were destined to become the gospel of classicism in England. Indeed, Dryden, in 1677, names Boileau and Rapin as among the chief of modern critics. Moreover, Thomas Rymer published his *Tragedies of the Last Age* in 1677. Rymer was the type of the logical critic who applies certain set formulas, judicially weighs the evidence, and decides with mathematical precision. His influence upon contemporary criticism was

immense, and doubtless he was one of the direct causes of Dryden's abrupt change of attitude, as it appears in his *Apology*, to a final submission to authority.

This can be illustrated by reference to his various positions regarding the purpose of poetry. In 1688, when in the full tide of success, he could assert: "Delight is the chief, if not the only, end of poetry; instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poesy instructs only as it delights."³ And again he could ask: "Why should there be any *ipse dixit* in our poetry any more than in philosophy?"⁴ Yet at almost the same time dread lest he had been too bold in self-assertion must have attacked him, for in the Preface to *Tyrannic Love* he admits that pleasure is not the only end of poetry, and asserts that precepts and examples of piety must not be omitted. In 1679 he cites Bossu as authority that the fable of a poem or a play must be built on a moral, and as late as 1690 he composes *Heads to an Answer to Mr. Rymer*, in itself a sufficient confession of weakness, in which he admits that the learned Mr. Rymer has well observed that in all punishment we are to regulate ourselves by poetic justice. Beyond this point even the most slavish soul need not go.

In all of this discussion, I have tried to avoid any estimation of the value of Dryden's criticisms. One need not yield to anybody in full enjoyment of his delightful prose or in appreciation of the justness and eloquence of some of the critical observations throughout the essays, even though one endeavors to seek a reason for the apparently abrupt changes of mood and points of view. I have tried to make clear that Dryden, instead of leading his age, as his genius entitled him to do, contented himself with following after contemporary thought and defending outworn modes of expression because of his employment of them. Though a man of great ability in controversy, he lacked the singleness of aim and the courage to maintain his opinion which mark a real thinker. Born between two epochs, he had not the will to accept either. Instead, though he leaned in his

³ *Defense of the Essay*.

⁴ Preface to *Mock Astrologer*, 1668.

heart to the spacious days of great Elizabeth, he felt himself forced to admit as authoritative critical canons not congenial to his temper, merely because he was incapable of opposition. In the sense that he was not true to his own mental life and that he never found tasks commensurate with his powers, Dryden stands out as one of the really pathetic figures in our literature.

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